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ABSTRACT

Empathy has been hypothesized as a mediator facilitating prosocial behaviors such as altruism. Definitions and measures of empathy disagree as to the extent to which the observer's response is affective and the necessity for the observer to understand the other's point of view. A conceptualization of empathy which includes these considerations has been shown to be the best predicter of altruistic behavior. (Author)

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EMPATHY AS A MOTIVATOR OF ALTRUISTIC BEHAVIOR[1]

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Although interest in altruism has spawned numerous theories and research attempting to support these theories, there appear to be flaws in these theories and noticeable gaps in the research. This paper will briefly review some of these theories and discuss the literature. After a critical analysis of these theories an alternative will be proposed which stresses the emotional response of the altruist. The research investigating this approach is sparse and mainly correlational rather then causal.

Altruism. Altruism may be loosely defined as any behavior which helps another. This definition may be attacked because it includes situations in which the benefactor is actually helping himself, his helping behavior with regard to the recipient being either coincidental or accidental. A more rigorous definition of altruism is any behavior on the behalf of another which does not benefit the benefactor but instead results in a net loss. This definition eliminates helping behaviors which have some overt rewards involved.

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Altruistic behavior has been explained in terms of characteristics of the benefactor; situational, trait, and social variables, and characteristics of the recipient; dependency, interpersonal attractiveness, and demographic variables (Krebs, 1970). Situational variables affecting altruism include the affective state of the benefactor and his attitudes about the appropriateness and consequences of an altruistic act. The existence of social norms, such as reciprocity, and various demographic variables, such as age, sex, and birth order, have also been related to altruistic behavior.

[1]Portions of this paper were presented at the meeting of the American Psychological Association, New Orleans, August 1974.

There has been relatively little experimental investigation of the relationship between traits of the benefactor and altruism although there have been correlational studies investigating the relationship between ratings of personality variables and altruism. A partial justification for a lack of interest in a trait approach is the general failure of trait variables to reliably predict behavior (Mischel, 1973). Mischel maintains, however, that more stable and reliable predictions can be made when cognitive variables are used. Cognitive processes, particularly the way an individual interprets social and environmental stimuli, are apparently more stable in the individual and therefore more reliable predictors. Two variables which are given practically no attention in the altruism literature yet do relate to the individual's perception of social and situational cues are role-taking and emotional responsiveness. These variables, until recently receiving little notice, have been emphasized in some theoretical approaches to altruism.

Three theories of altruism. In explaining altruistic behavior theorists have relied upon three possible motivators: (a) expectation of reward; (b) observational learning; (c) emotional responsiveness. The first two motivators have been suggested by the more traditional mechanistic approaches but fail to explain altruistic behavior in a variety of situations. The third approach is applicable to these and other problems but has not been adequately investigated.

It may be that there is implicit in the altruistic act an expectation for reciprocity or reward even though it is not readily apparent to the naive observer. The altruistic act might therefore serve as a response which is instrumental in obtaining a reward such as ingratiation, praise, social approval, or repayment of a debt. A child shares his candy with a friend because of the expectation of his peers and because he expects reciprocity when the friend also has something of value. This explanation of altruism does not account for the research which demonstrates altruistic behavior when there is no previous debt or possibility of reward, e.g., in some cases

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nobody would ever be aware of the subject's altruism.

Social Learning theorists often use observational learning to explain the acquisition of seemingly unreinforced behaviors such as altruism. But observational learning is more of a descriptive mechanism than an explanatory one. A child sees his parents help another child who has fallen down and subsequently helps another child when this child falls under similar circumstances. What may be learned is a social norm of giving. That is, what is acquired is a tendancy to give in situations in which the individual has observed others giving. This explanation is insufficient in that it does not indicate what motivates the behavior if there is no explicit external reward.

Aronfreed (1968) and Hebb (1971) have suggested that the benefactor's emotional response to the model and the recipient may be the motivator for the observational learning of altruistic behavior. Returning to the child mentioned earlier, he may witness the joy of the other child when this child is helped. If the first child is emotionally responsive to the other he will experience the other's joy. Through observation, the observer learns which responses are instrumental in producing a positive emotional response in another. Altruistic behavior is one such response. The reward for this altruistic behavior is the experiencing of the other's positive affect. Other theorists are beginning to acknowledge the likelihood that this emotional response of the benefactor may be the motivator of altruistic behavior and perhaps the only motivation for true altruism--altruism having no immediate or anticipated external reinforcer--(Krebs, 1971; Berkowitz, 1972; Hoffman, 1973).

Defining altruism as "any purposive action on behalf of someone else that involves a net cost to the actor [p. 3]" Hoffman (1973) concludes that the development of altruism "rests ultimately on the human capacity to experience the inner states of others who are not in the same situation [p. 7]." Thus an external reinforcement is not as important as the response to the other's emotional state. Hoffman stresses

both the cognitive and affective skills necessary for such a response, particularly the ability to shift back and forth from one's own role to that of another (role-switching).

The benefactor's emotional response to someone in need motivates his altruistic behavior. A child sees the distress of another child who has dropped his ice cream cone. The first child attempts to reduce this distress by sharing his candy with the second child. When one individual views another individual in need he may respond emotionally to the other's emotional state. The observer's emotions will tend to move in the same direction as the other. If this emotion is an aversive affect such as sadness, pain, fright, etc. the observer will want to eliminate this emotion in himself or respond to this emotion in some way. If this emotion had been aroused by the situation alone or the observer cannot decenter from his own perspective, his response is unlikely to be altruistic. Instead he may respond to the situation from his own perspective through some form of flight or acting as though he was the one in need, frightened, etc. By decentering the observer realizes that the situation does not cause his affective arousal and may not influence him at all (or may be inappropriate for the particular affect which he is experiencing). Once the observer understands that it is the other's affect which is influencing his behavior he is better able to arrive at the appropriate coping behavior. Leaving the field is still an alternative. However, by trying to reduce the other's negative affect (assuming he has the necessary skills), the observer not only reduces his own aversive affect, but, if he is successful in bringing a positive affect such as joy to the other, he may experience this joy also.

Emotional responsiveness functions as a reinforcer even though it is internalized and therefore not easily observable. The reduction of negative affect and the possibility of subsequently experiencing the other's positive affect (aside from possible motivation due to reduction in guilt, social norms, reciprocity, etc.) serves

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as a reinforcer for the altruistic behavior.

Emotional responsiveness and altruism: Supporting research. Support for a theory which emphasizes the role of emotional responsiveness in altruistic behavior would come from a study which increased or decreased emotional responsiveness to produce a similar change in altruistic behavior. The theory would be challenged if such a manipulation of emotional responsiveness resulted in no change or a negative relationship. Although some studies have manipulated the situational determinants of the subjects' emotional response none have trained the skills necessary for this emotional responsiveness. Therefore it may be argued that such a manipulation of the situation is affecting altruism directly rather than through the process of emotional responsiveness.

A few studies demonstrate how variables which influence emotional responsiveness also result in a change in altruistic behavior. Krebs (1971) cites a study in which subjects who were led to believe they were most similar to the recipient experienced an emotional response similar to the emotions of the recipient, and behaved more altruistically than subjects who believed they were not similar and subsequently experienced less of an emotional response. Aronfreed (1968) cites several unpublished studies which indicate that subjects whose emotional responses were previously conditioned (association of positive affective cues with positive affect arousing reward) subsequently were more altruistic to the individual that emitted these same cues.

There are studies which are directed to the relationship between emotional responsiveness and altruism and they indicate some of the variables influencing this relationship. Aderman and Berkowitz (1970) instructed their subjects to either imagine how they would feel (Imagine-Self) or imagine how the other person feels (Imagine-Him) when the other person was either a person in need or a potential helper under conditions in which there was no help, help but no thanks, or help with thanks.

They found that the Imagine-Him Conditions for the person in need but without help and for the thanked helper produced the greatest amount of altruism. They also measured the mood of the subjects. The subjects who imagined the person in need felt bad, while those who attended to the thanked helper felt good. It was concluded that these emotional experiences motivated the helping behavior. Although the study leaves open the possibility of modeling, such an explanation would not account for the altruistic response of those who attend to the unhelped person in need or the subsequent emotional response in either this situation or the thanked helper situation. The authors conclude that "the data tend to be consistent with the proposition that different empathic reactions can mediate helping behavior[p. 146]."

Cognitive aspects of emotional responsiveness. There is still some question of the necessity of cognitive processes such as role-taking for emotional responsiveness to be present in the benefactor. Although Mischel (1973) stresses the importance of processes which influence the individual's perception of the social and situational cues, research in support of this relationship is sparse.

Staub (1971) found that role-playing was effective in increasing altruistic behavior. Staub compared the effect of role-taking and induction on subsequent altruism. Children either alternated playing the role of someone in need and the role of a benefactor or played no role at all. Half of each group was also told the positive outcomes of helping (induction). The increased altruism in the role-taking groups persisted over a one week interval. Again, these data may be interpreted in terms of modeling, viewing a partner play the role of benefactor, or in terms of emotional responsiveness, practicing switching roles and understanding the emotions of those in need.

Iannotti (1974) trained role-taking skills in kindergarten and third grade children using a variety of experiences, some including the roles of benefactor and beneficiary. Children who experienced role-taking training shared significantly more

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than those children who heard a story about the roles but did not actively experience them.

Measurement of empathy. Different measurement techniques have complicated attempts to understand the role of empathy in prosocial behavior (Iannotti and Meachem, 1974). Measures of empathy have stressed either the affective component, that is, the emotional response of one individual to the affective state of another, or the cognitive component, the ability to unders and the emotions of another by taking his perspective or point of view. The affective approach measures emotional matching and requires that the emotional state of the observer approach the emotional state of the other. The cognitive approach defines empathy as perspective-taking or role-taking and requires the correct identification of another's thoughts or feelings in situations which demand that the observer assume the other's point of view. It is the combination of both affective and cognitive dimensions which makes empathy a promising developmental construct for understanding prosocial behavior. Both role-taking and emotional matching are necessary for us to understand the role of empathy as a motivator of altruism.

The present investigation. In order to explore the empathy-altruism relationship Iannotti (1974) administered measures of sharing, role-taking, and several measures of empathy to children approximately six and nine years old. One of the measures of empathy required only emotional matching. A second measure evaluated understanding of the other's emotions. Neither of these showed any significant relationship to sharing. A significant relationship was found, however, for the measure of empathy which required both role-taking and emotional matching (i.e., which involved assessment of both cognitive and affective dimensions). In this measure inconsistent emotional and situational cues were presented to the child and the child's emotional response was measured (cf., Burns and Cavey, 1957). This measure was correlated with both role-taking and sharing, accounting for 21% of the variance in the sharing measure. Thus,

when analyzing the altruism-empathy relationship a conception of empathy which includes both role-taking and emotional matching provides greater theoretical understanding and is supported by the research.

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